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Behind China’s English Fever: The Contested Discourses on English Education and People’s Yearning for Flexible Citizenship

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Introduction and Research Questions

China’s English Fever can be traced back to the 1970s when English replaced Russian in the national foreign language curriculum. As a former Assistant Professor of English in Shanghai, I have had the opportunity not only to witness China’s English Fever that has been sweeping the country for almost three decades, but also to teach students who are incredibly enthusiastic in learning English, regardless of their majors and of their initially drastically different English proficiency levels.

What always intrigues me is the question of why: Why are Chinese people so dedicated to learning English? The proposed study is an attempt to look for some plausible answers to this central question from two related yet separate, not always aligned perspectives: the perspective of the government and that of the common people.

Theoretical Frameworks

Cultural Studies—an interdisciplinary framework in which different disciplines and theories can be drawn to examine the power relations as well as the ideology embedded in the cultural phenomenon.

Critical Discourse Analysis—a type of discourse analytical research that shares a number of tenets with critical theory.

Method

Research Design: Qualitative research of existing public documents on China’s English Fever.

Two Sets of Data:

1) News items, editorials and other relevant publications on English education, collected from China’s official media channels, such as Xinhua News Agency and China Daily.
2) People’s discussion postings about reasons of learning English on major Chinese social media, such as Baidu Tieba and Douban.

Data Analysis:

1) Critical discourse analysis of the first set of data;
2) Thematic analysis of the second set of data.

Results

The Chinese government has been swinging between two contested discourses on English education—“English for everyone” (the pro-English discourse) vs. “English not as important as Chinese” (the anti-English discourse).

In answering the question “Why do you learn English?” the two most frequently mentioned reasons are: 1) to go abroad; 2) to move upward by having a better job.

Discussion

China’s English fever is much more than an urge to master a global language; instead it is driven both by the government’s pro-English language education discourse and by people’s yearning for mobility and flexible citizenship.

The Chinese government’s contested discourses on the English language education reflect its ambivalent attitudes towards the West, as well as an undercurrent worry about its national identity in an age of globalization and cultural hybridity.